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ABSTRACT

Presenting the idea that girls need the ability to approach passages of text with a critical, resistant eye that sees what values, social codes, or political agendas the passages communicate, a literacy club for at-risk girls within the school setting can enable girls to read and write their ways into richer selves by exploring and generating texts that provide models of healthy adult women who are strong and resilient. Striving for "translation/critical literacy" instead of mere comprehension skills is important for at-risk adolescent girls because critical literacy can help them make choices that lead to fulfilling lives. The choice of a "girls only" club reflects the emphasis of the proposed curriculum, curriculum that celebrates the development of healthy and successful women. Encouraging "translation/critical literacy" is accomplished by gearing the subject matters toward the interests of the individuals. Personal development occurs when the active engagement of alternative narratives (reading biographies of caring women who have become scientist for example) can manifest in the adolescent reader. Beginning and organizing a literacy club consists of five steps: (1) sharing personal stories; (2) selecting books and texts; (3) setting literacy goals; (4) establishing the nature of the literacy club; and (5) evaluating the literacy clubs. (Contains 28 references and a brief description of how one girl's club learned about one female scientist's contributions.) (SC)

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Literacy Clubs for At-Risk Girls

by

Bea Naff, Ed.D., and Shelley Fones, Ph.D.

Introduction

The message is clear. Schools are still shortchanging girls, many girls, not just girls who are traditionally perceived to be at risk of school failure because of low achievement, race, socioeconomic background or psychological problems (AAUW, 1991; AAUW, 1992). Girls with high achievement and with ambitions to be scientists also are struggling, just as those who rarely dream of life beyond high school. All of these girls, diverse as they are, need support within the school structure to enable them to realize their dreams, to compete in an increasingly complex global community. For example, they need some way to communicate and critique scientific data, knowledge, concepts, and procedures as they also communicate and examine their personal feelings, values, and aspirations. They need to develop what Miles Myers (1996) has termed "translation/critical literacy," or the ability to not only translate passages of text but to be critical of them, to resist them, to see what values, social codes or political agendas they communicate. In addition, they must learn multiple ways of presenting ideas in texts, whether it be a scientific journal article or an employment application. In doing so, they will consider often the needs of the audience, the texts' purposes, as well as their own basic beliefs and agendas that are shaping their communications. Simply put, girls need to learn to read and write many types of texts in conscious and critical ways so that they have a chance to fashion selves that are alert, intentional, and equipped to meet the demands of their chosen pathways.

Girls' literacy clubs within the school setting can enable girls to read and write their ways into richer selves by exploring and generating texts that provide models of healthy adult women who are strong and resilient, women who are able to break through barriers and glass ceilings, and who use their personal gifts in ways that strengthen self and others. What follows is a brief summary of our rationale and our own research on literacy clubs for at-risk girls as well as practical suggestions for implementing comparable clubs in school settings. We also include a wealth of resources for locating texts that celebrate feminine courage and resolve, texts that address the needs of and provide models for aspiring female scientists, writers, business executives, entrepreneurs, and service professionals.

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Why Strive for Translation/Critical Literacy Instead of Mere Comprehension Skills?

Literacy leaders cannot continue to teach girls to merely read and write texts that perpetuate versions of femininity that limit instead of encourage healthy and full development. The most traditional response to illiteracy has been a basic skills and drills approach, either one-on-one sessions with teacher and pupil or a group of students who work independently and sometimes together mastering basics such as sentence sense, vocabulary, word attack skills and writing proficiencies. Basic skills are needed skills, but they do not furnish the critical literacy skills that are demanded for life in the twenty-first century. Literacy researchers have shown that at-risk students can learn to read the world around them as they also learn to read and write simple text. Specifically, they can employ translation/critical literacy skills (Myers, 1996) that are advocated in NCTE/IRA English Language Arts Standards, the standards that will be shaping literacy curriculum throughout the country, while also utilizing basic skills (Smagorinsky, 1996). Miles Myers' translation/critical literacy theory permeates the whole set of national standards that will drive curricula for the next decades.

For at-risk adolescent girls, critical literacy can help them make choices that lead to fulfilling lives. For example, instead of being pained by the models of feminine beauty displayed in many major magazines, they can learn to read those images in ways that make those models less than iconic. They can explore, for example, why the magazine is publishing the image, what it hopes to sell, how much personal freedom the model might gain or lose by serving as a physical model, and how beauty is socially negotiated throughout cultures and epochs. They can learn to diffuse feminine messages from the popular media that sometimes lead girls toward future foci related to physical beauty at the sacrifice of other aims such as meaningful career pursuits like science, education, or entrepreneurship (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Christian-Smith, 1988).

Why a Girls Only Club?

With all the critical press about the Citadel and the Virginia Military Institute's all-male policy, why would we advocate a single-sex literacy club for girls? We do so for many reasons, both theoretical and practical. Carol Gilligan (1982; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1989) suggests that young adolescent girls need time apart to reflect upon their lives. They need a nurturing environment which welcomes their unique voices and gives them plenty of room to question, share confusions and open up to express their true feelings and thoughts. In coeducational settings, adolescent girls often end up being silenced as young males dominate the teacher's focus and conversations (AAUW, 1992). In *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), the various authors suggest that several steps are involved in helping some women develop their own unique voices. They may need to move from total silence to budding confidence in who they know and what they know. This development is sometimes realized in a safe, single-sex, set apart community of young women.

On a practical level, it makes little sense to expose adolescent boys to a curriculum that only celebrates the development of healthy and successful women just as it has been unjust for girls to be exposed to all-male casts of influential personas in history, science, and literary texts down through all but the most recent decades.

How To Encourage Translation-Critical Literacy

In *Changing Our Minds* (1996), Myers insists that all language learning should transpire within meaningful language enterprises; that novitiates should do the very things readers, writers, and thinkers do; and, in that process, use the basic skills to produce texts, performances, speeches, and/or research that has relevance for their lives. They also need to take time to reflect upon their literacy enterprises, exploring their larger significance and the kinds of literacy skills utilized. Teaching the basics in an isolated way simply does not provide

authentic contexts for students, male or female, to develop their language arts capabilities. Within a literacy club, however, girls can work together with supportive leaders to engage in meaningful literacy events (Barbary & Naff, 1995). The girls receive scaffolding or needed skill support from their teachers and club members as they co-create meaning together. The skill training is provided in the context of real language demands. Furthermore, the simplistic basic skills approach in no way addresses the adolescent girls' needs to cultivate voice and identity. It merely helps with isolated skills, not the girls' larger literacy needs, the need to read the world around them as they make crucial life choices.

How Can Critical Literacy Lead to Personal Development?

Jerome Bruner in *The Culture of Education* (1996) and *Real Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986), theorizes that our personal lives are shaped by narratives that we internalize and use as we interact with others. These narratives are shaped, in part, by past experiences, relationships with others, our travels and readings, as well as our own private reflections. It is through the active use of the language arts that we can change, rewrite, or revise our narratives. For example, an adolescent girl may have a script or narrative within her that states that she cannot be a scientist, that science is for "nerdy" men only. Through a literacy club that utilizes active language arts enterprises, she can read many biographies of caring women who have become scientists. This active engagement with alternative narratives for being can help her begin to imagine a possible professional life as, for example, a biologist who devotes research efforts to cleaning up polluted rivers.

How to Start a Literacy Club for Girls

Literacy clubs for adolescent girls can be forged outside of the school structure and/or within it. Outside of school, literacy clubs can be formed within existing girls' clubs (YWCA, Girl Scouts), counseling centers, church programs, youth programs, parks and recreation summer programs, or forged anew as separate clubs. Within the school, literacy clubs for girls can be held during regularly scheduled club day, after school as a part of after-school programs, during lunch (eat as you discuss books together), during study hall, or within reading workshops set up within the actual classroom.

Any adolescent girl could be aptly labeled at risk of being denied career and/or lifestyle options because of her gender (AAUW, 1992; Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Pipher, 1994). The clubs, therefore, should be open to *all* adolescent girls no matter what their aptitude, race, cultural, or socioeconomic status.

1) Sharing Personal Stories: An Essential First Step

Before delving into the selected texts, club members must take ample time to share their own personal stories and their own understandings of what it is like to be young women. Otherwise, the club runs the risk of focusing too heavily on the texts instead of the girls. The young women's stories should be of utmost importance in the clubs, not just the texts and their empowering female role models. The texts simply cue the girls' thinking as they discover who they are and can be as women. They provide a plethora of options that the girls can consider as they craft their own ways of understanding.

Several methods can aid this personal storytelling process. For example, members could be asked to draw simple symbolic maps detailing their life histories. A Life Map, for example, might include trying moments, celebrations, turning points, and crises. Other methods might include having members share topical journal entries about facets of their pasts, or letting each member interview another member and then share the interviewed member's story. As members share these personal stories, a sense of community should naturally develop.

As researchers, we decided to have club members in our literacy club for aspiring female scientists complete an open-ended survey that asked participants to describe

their versions of scientists and then share those with the group. The data and conversations were revealing. No high-ability participant could name a contemporary female scientist and almost all saw scientists as "nerdy" men. This intimate focus on a specific narrative within their minds enabled us to begin to forge readings and discussions that might call into question those adopted narratives. Then, our literacy club read and wrote about female scientists who used science in caring ways, scientists such as Barbara McClintock who won a Nobel Prize for discovering that genes jump, explaining the difficulties in tracing and curing many contemporary maladies such as cancer and AIDS.

2) Selecting Books and Texts

Texts matter. It is important to choose texts that help girls think of their roles as young women in new ways. Some should focus on women coming of age. Others should be young adult books that connect the lives of empowered women (both contemporary and historical) to young readers' worlds. The texts may be fiction or nonfiction, short or long, print or film. In fact, if many of the girls have problems with reading, shorter texts, videos, or books-on-tapes may be better at first. Magazine articles from progressive magazines like *Teen* will work. Have girls watch *In Country*, *Postcards from the Edge*, or the classic, *Norma Rae*, noting the strengths of the female characters and the obstacles that had to be overcome. Do not limit the club merely to books—hence the name "literacy club" (Smith, 1989) instead of the traditional "book club." Below is a current resource guide that is helpful for locating texts that contain strengthening versions of femininity.

Kathleen Odean's *Great Books for Girls: More Than 600 Books To Inspire Today's Girls and Tomorrow's Women* (1997), strongly advocated by Mary Pipher, author of *Reviving Ophelia*, is specifically designed to help adults recommend books to girls that "safeguard the girls' sense of self." The author chose books that had characters who are "creative, capable, articulate, and intelligent. They solve problems, face challenges, resolve conflicts, and go on journeys. These girls are not waiting to be rescued; they are doing the rescuing. Nor are they waiting for a male to provide a happy ending: They are fashioning their own stories" (Odean, 1997, p. 8). The resource book provides collections of texts based on genres from picture-story books to scientists and inventors texts to sports biographies.

Reviews of breaking Young Adult novels for young women can be found in monthly issues of the *ALAN Review* or *SIGNAL*. NCTE's *Books for You: Senior High* or *Junior High* or ALA's *Junior High School Library Catalog* list books with annotations that have been and/or will be published in the near future. Teasley and Wilder (1997) offer many film possibilities in their new release, *Reel Conversations: Reading Films With Young Adults*.

3) Literacy Goals

The purpose of the literacy club should be a clear and transformative one. The girls should learn that reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing can change their lives both subtly and profoundly if that is their wish. Most of the girls will come to the literacy club with the entrenched notion that they will improve their reading skills or that they will learn to write better. They have been taught this version of literacy and will have to learn that there are other purposes for actively using their language arts. The best way to share the nature of literacy is to share your own stories, to model how you have been positively influenced by texts you have savored or the texts you have produced which have made a difference in your life. In addition, the texts that are chosen for critical review and discussion should include female characters who are actively using their literacy skills in a whole host of meaningful endeavors, from preparing a research report to presenting a speech that explains the need for a new health care measure.

After modeling active, literate life through personal stories and textual examples, members think of ways that they can use their new-found insights about literacy to shape a richer world for themselves and others. They should think of and then move toward realizing personal projects that could be of benefit to themselves or their community, projects that stem from their new ways of thinking or seeing (Martin, 1987). For example, in Cain

and Hilty's study (1990, 1991, 1993), Matika began to study African-American history as a means of becoming an historian of her people. It is not enough to assume that young women will be positively changed in a literacy club setting simply by sitting around and "getting off" on or transacting with the literature they read. Structured discussions must revolve around how they will change themselves and the world around them as a result of their insights. Share possible projects as vehicles for change: letters to editors, development of new programs to address a social or environmental concern, or personal contracts for realizing a worthy professional goal. In the literacy club for aspiring scientists that we developed, students composed a feature article for their local paper entitled, "Young Female Scientists Read and Write About an 'A-maize-ing' Nobel Prize Winner" (Bancone, K., Bauer K., Brown, J., Chapman, B., DeSoto, M., & Spivey, L., 1995). The contents of the published article is included on page 6.

The girls spent many weeks together reading and writing about caring female scientists before they chose to write an article for the larger public about McClintock's contributions and their new insights about those. As noted in the article, after an extended focus on caring female scientists, the girls were more committed to pursuing science-related careers (while they also picked up many basic skills related to punctuation, word choice, narrative voice, supporting detail, and the use of examples to teach a new concept).

4) Nature of Literacy Club: An Enterprising Community

Begin by crafting literacy clubs with whole language principles in mind (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1991; Graves, 1983; Hansen, 1989; Smith, 1989) since the participants need support within real-life enterprises that require many cognitive and social skills. In keeping with research on whole language, give participants plenty of time to read and discuss texts. In Cain and Hilty's literacy club (1990, 1991, 1993), the members enjoyed a two-hour get-together every week during the summer. During the school year, however, bimonthly meetings might be better so that the members have ample time to read the texts prior to the club meetings. With especially reluctant readers, allow club time for exploring shorter works: short stories, magazines, or films. Establish predictable literacy club times so the girls can plan ways to be actively involved when the club meets. Within actual classrooms, girls can get together more often to discuss their books—up to several times a week.

In addition to plenty of time and predictable times, help club members develop ownership or responsibility for the nature of the club. For example, let them decide what books they will explore. In the 1990 literacy club (Cain & Hilty), the girls chose their 10 texts from a group of 50. They looked at the front and back covers and read reviews that helped them make the choices. Within the Aspiring Scientist Club, the participants decided which selections from an anthology they would explore. The anthology, *The Mothers of Invention, From the Bra to the Bomb: Forgotten Women and Their Unforgettable Ideas* (Vare & Ptacek, 1987), was filled with short nonfiction accounts about women who had created or made discoveries that change the way we all live and work. Also allow the participants to decide when and where they will meet and for how long. This is yet another subtle form of responsibility. Members can even handle refreshments.

Plenty of response from helpful mentors, community members, family members, and caring peers encourage the girls to feel that their personal sharings about their own lives as well as the responses to the shared texts are heard and appreciated. Coach members to actively listen to their peers and how to tag on to their input in creative ways. Model simple communication practices like helping the girls restate what their buddies have shared and then elaborating on it. Ongoing response is vital.

To help members forge their reader responses that they will eventually share in the club sessions, a simple reader response guide can be encouraged. Basically, ask members to respond to three questions in their literacy journals as they explore a given text: 1) How did you feel about the text? Elaborate. 2) Make three personal associations with the text. Push until you connect with the text in at least three ways. 3) What passage did you particularly like and why? Be able to share specifics

Young Female Scientists Read and Write About An A-Maize-ing Nobel Prize Winner: Barbara McClintock

by

Kristen Bancone, Kendra Bauer, Jami Brown, Briele Chapman, Misty DeSoto, and Leanne Spivey

Just how many uses of CORN can YOU think of? We know popped corn is used for our group dates at the Easley Cinema. Our parents give it to us on the cob at supper time. We're even munching corn chips as we write. But, we never dreamed that corn was used to understand the complexity of genes—not until we learned about Barbara McClintock, a Nobel Prize-winning scientist.

As teen female scientists at Gettys Middle (Home of the Breakers), we now know that genes are not what we throw on in the morning. Genes aren't jeans—another member of our wardrobe. Instead, genes are sections of chromosomes within DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid, pronounced dee-ox-e-rye-bow-new-clay-ick a-sid) that carry information about such things as our physical traits. They may determine, for example, whether we have baby blue eyes or brown ones, beautiful tans or charming freckles, or even fire-engine red or sexy blond hair.

Gregor Mendel (1822-1884) did much of the groundbreaking work in genetics related to inherited traits like the ones described above, but in the 1950s Barbara McClintock (1902-) discovered that genes sometimes jump. In other words, they do not always follow a predictable pattern. Using maize, an Indian corn with lots of colorful kernels, she found that kernels on the cob did not always repeat themselves in a consistent order. McClintock's discovery has helped us understand how antibodies, which have jumping genes, respond to various stresses in the environment. This knowledge is helping us better understand mysterious diseases such as cancer and AIDS.

Despite her a-maize-ing discovery, Barbara McClintock struggled as an ambitious female scientist. Although her father was a medical doctor, she rarely talked to him about her early interest in genetics. Her mother was opposed to her "life of the mind," and actually snubbed her decision to enroll in the College of Agriculture at Cornell in Ithaca, New York. After she became a professor, she was unable to secure tenure. She was eventually dismissed for being a maverick.

Fortunately, however, she had a good friend, Marcus Rhoades, who helped her land a grant and move her research to Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island, New York. There, she worked in joyful solitude. In fact, upon receiving the Nobel Prize, she commented, "It might seem unfair to reward a person for having so much pleasure over the years. I can't imagine having a better life." McClintock made this statement when she was over eighty years old.

For the past five months, we club members at Gettys [Middle School] have met weekly after school to discuss female scientists like Barbara McClintock and their contributions. For example, we discovered that Eliza Pinckney was an aspiring young scientist from South Carolina just like us. As a teenager in the Colonial period, she conducted experiments on growing indigo. She eventually shared her seed with plantation owners throughout the low country and helped bring millions to our state. Elizabeth Hazen and Rachel Brown developed nystatin, an antibiotic that can cure athlete's foot and ringworm. They gave their royalties to help fund research in mycology, the study of fungi. Many other female scientists also used science in caring ways to make our world better.

On the opening day of our afternoon science club, we were asked to describe the typical scientist. All of us described men who were either "nerdy" or who looked like Albert Einstein. None of us described caring or creative females. When asked to list all the female scientist we knew, only one of us, Kendra Bauer, could name Eliza Pinckney, a woman scientist that she had just read about in history. But, now that we have completed our library research (at Gettys Middle Media Center, Pickens County Library, and Clemson University Library), we can name many female scientists and their contributions. Rosalind Franklin helped identify the structure DNA. Louise Pearce found a cure for sleeping sickness that is caused by the tsetse fly. She did for sleeping sickness what Jonas Salk did for polio. Rosalind Yalow, upon accepting the Nobel Prize for her invention of a medical tool that was far more useful for diagnosis than the x-ray, stated that "We [female scientists] must believe in ourselves or no one else will believe in us." Through our club, we have begun to believe in ourselves as future women scientists.

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about what impressed or provoked you (Thompson, 1989). Invariably, the responses to these questions become fodder for club discussions. Expect a rich dialogue after members are given time to structure and forge their own responses.

Lastly, provide girls a warm and supportive context in which to share their transactions with texts. Make them feel welcomed to share their lives with others as they are sculpting them.

5) Evaluating Literacy Clubs

There are a variety of ways for evaluating literacy clubs and transactions within them. First, a leader can have conferences with the girls from time to time so that they can share their new insights or changes. Serve as participant observers within the group sessions, noting how the girls are changing and growing. Respond to participants' journals, when invited, to develop insight about participants' growth and development. This journal review is especially helpful with shy members who have had rich transactions with texts but who are afraid to share them with the group. Give an open-ended survey periodically that asks girls to comment on dimensions of the club and its benefits. Most importantly, evaluate the projects that the girls forge as indicators of the literacy clubs' effectiveness in helping young women foster richer worlds for themselves and others through the active use of the language arts.

Conclusion

Literacy clubs can be powerful forums for girls as they deal with the complexities of coming of age. As our recent studies illustrate as well as the work of other literacy scholars (Smith, 1989; Langer, 1995), young women can forge new ways of seeing and being as they explore appropriate texts in a supportive literacy club. Literacy clubs seem to be helping many adolescent girls, not just those labelled "at-risk," discover many options and develop strategies for a wealth of healthy professional and personal pursuits.

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